

# Buddhist Meditation and its Practice in the World

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Meditation is a holistic discipline by which the practitioner attempts to get beyond the reflexive, "thinking" mind into a deeper state of relaxation or awareness. Meditation is a component of many religions, and has been practiced since antiquity. It is also practiced outside religious traditions. Different meditative disciplines encompass a wide range of spiritual and non-spiritual goals; achieving a higher state of consciousness or enlightenment, developing and increasing compassion and lovingkindness, receiving spiritual inspiration or guidance, achieving greater focus, creativity or self-awareness, or simply cultivating a more relaxed and peaceful frame of mind.

## 1. Introduction:

Buddhist meditation encompasses a variety of meditation techniques that develop mindfulness, concentration, supramundane powers, tranquility, and insight. Core meditation techniques have been preserved in ancient Buddhist texts and have proliferated and diversified through the millennia of teacher-student transmissions. Buddhists pursue meditation as part of the path toward Enlightenment and Nirvāna.<sup>[1]</sup> The closest words for meditation in the classical languages of Buddhism are *bhāvanā*<sup>[2]</sup> and *jhāna*.<sup>[3]</sup> Buddhist meditation techniques have become increasingly popular in the wider world, with many non-Buddhists taking them up for a variety of reasons.

Given the large number and diversity of traditional Buddhist meditation practices, this article primarily identifies authoritative contextual frameworks – both contemporary and canonical – for the variety of practices. Those seeking school – specific meditation instructions, it may be more appropriate to simply view the articles listed in the "See also" section below.

## 2. Types of Buddhist Meditation

While there are some similar meditative practices — such as breath meditation and various recollections (*anussati*) — that are used across Buddhist schools, there is also significant diversity. For example, in the Theravāda tradition alone, there are over fifty methods for developing mindfulness and forty for developing concentration, while the Tibetan tradition has thousands of visualization meditations.<sup>[4]</sup>

Most classical and contemporary Buddhist meditation guides are school specific.<sup>[5]</sup> Only a few teachers attempt to synthesize, crystallize and categorize practices from multiple Buddhist traditions.

In terms of early traditions as found in the vast Pali canon and the Āgamas, meditation can be contextualized as part of the Noble Eightfold Path, explicitly in regard to:

- Right Mindfulness (*sammāsati*) — exemplified by the Buddha's Four Foundations of Mindfulness (see *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta*).
- Right Concentration (*sammasamādhi*) — culminating in *jhanic* absorptions through the meditative development of *samatha*.<sup>[8]</sup>

And implicitly in regard to :

- Right View (*sammādiṭṭhi*) — embodying wisdom traditionally attained through the meditative development of *vipassanā* founded on *samatha*.<sup>[9]</sup>

Classic texts in the Pāli literature enumerating meditative subjects include the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta* (MN 10) and the Visuddhimagga's Part II, "Concentration" (*Samādhi*).

## 3. The Buddha's four foundations for mindfulness

In the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta*, the Buddha identifies four foundations for mindfulness: the body, feelings, mind states and mental objects. He further enumerates the following objects as bases for the meditative development of mindfulness:

- Body (*kāyā*)
  1. Breathing (see *Ānāpānasati Sutta*)
  2. Postures
  3. Clear Comprehending
  4. Reflections on Repulsiveness of the Body
  5. Reflections on Material Elements
  6. Cemetery Contemplations
- Feelings (*vedanā*)
- Mind (*cittā*)
- Mental Contents (*dhammā*)
  1. The Hindrances

2. The Aggregates
3. The Sense-Bases
4. The Factors of Enlightenment
5. The Four Noble Truths

Meditation on these subjects develops insight.<sup>[10]</sup>

## 4. Swift messengers of Nibbāna: Serenity and insight

The Buddha is said to have identified two paramount mental qualities that arise from wholesome meditative practice:

- "serenity" or "tranquillity" (Pāli: *samatha*) which steadies, composes, unifies and concentrates the mind;
- "insight" (Pāli: *vipassanā*) which enables one to see, explore and discern "formations" (conditioned phenomena based on the five aggregates).<sup>[11]</sup>

Through the meditative development of serenity, one is able to suppress obscuring hindrances; and, with the suppression of the hindrances, it is through the meditative development of insight that one gains liberating wisdom.<sup>[12]</sup> Moreover, the Buddha is said to have extolled serenity and insight as conduits for attaining Nibbāna (Pāli; Skt.: *Nirvāṇa*), the unconditioned state. For example, in the "*Kimsuka Tree Sutta*" (SN 35.245), the Buddha provides an elaborate metaphor in which serenity and insight is "the swift pair of messengers" who delivers the message of *Nibbāna* via the Noble Eightfold Path.<sup>[13]</sup>

In the "Four Ways to *Arahantship Sutta*" (AN 4.170), Ven. Ananda reports that people attain arahantship using serenity and insight in one of three ways:

1. they develop serenity and then insight (Pāli: *samatha-pubbangamam vipassanam*)
2. they develop insight and then serenity (Pāli: *vipassana-pubbangamam samatham*)<sup>[14]</sup>
3. they develop serenity and insight in tandem (Pāli: *samatha-vipassanam yuganaddham*), for instance, obtaining the first *jhāna* and then seeing in the associated aggregates the three marks of existence, before proceeding to the second *jhāna*.<sup>[15]</sup>

In the Pali canon, the Buddha never mentions independent *samatha* and *vipassanā* meditation practices; instead, *samatha* and *vipassanā* are two *qualities of mind* to be developed through meditation.<sup>[16]</sup> Nonetheless, some meditation practices (such as contemplation of a *kasiṇa* object) favor the development of *samatha*, others are conducive to the development of *vipassanā* (such as contemplation of the aggregates), while others (such as mindfulness of breathing) are classically used for developing both mental

qualities.<sup>[17]</sup>

## 5. From the Pali Commentaries

Buddhaghosa's forty meditation subjects are described in the Visuddhimagga. Almost all of these are described in the early texts.<sup>[18]</sup> Buddhaghosa advises that, for the purpose of developing concentration and "consciousness," a person should "apprehend from among the forty meditation subjects one that suits his own temperament" with the advice of a "good friend" (*kalyāṇamitta*) who is knowledgeable in the different meditation subjects (Ch. III, § 28).<sup>[19]</sup> Buddhaghosa subsequently elaborates on the forty meditation subjects as follows (Ch. III, § 104; Chs. IV-XI):<sup>[20]</sup>

- ten kasinas: earth, water, fire, air, blue, yellow, red, white, light, and "limited-space".
- ten kinds of foulness: "the bloated, the livid, the festering, the cut-up, the gnawed, the scattered, the hacked and scattered, the bleeding, the worm-infested, and a skeleton".
- ten recollections: the Buddha, the Dhamma, the Saṅgha, virtue, generosity, the virtues of deities, death (see Upajjhathana Sutta), the body, the breath (see ānāpānasati), and peace (see Nibbāna).
- four divine abodes: mettā, karuṇā, muditā, and upekkhā.
- four immaterial states: boundless space, boundless perception, nothingness, and neither perception nor non-perception.
- one perception (of "repulsiveness in nutriment")
- one "defining" (that is, the four elements)

When one overlays Buddhaghosa's 40 meditative subjects for the development of concentration with the Buddha's foundations of mindfulness, three practices are found to be in common: breath meditation, foulness meditation (which is similar to the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta*'s cemetery contemplations and related to reflections of bodily repulsiveness), and contemplation of the four elements. Of these, according to Pali commentaries, only breath meditation can lead one to the equanimous fourth *jhanic* absorption. Foulness meditation can lead to the attainment of the first *jhana*, and contemplation of the four elements culminates in pre-*jhana* access concentration.<sup>[21]</sup>

## 6. Five Types of Zen

In the early ninth century, Zongmi (Chinese; Guifeng Zongmi or Kuei-feng Tsung-mi; Jap., Kei-ho) grouped meditation practices into five categories. The following classifications are best known to Zen practitioners, who also maintain that this typology is

applicable to all Buddhist meditation practices.<sup>[22]</sup> According to this typology, the outward appearance of all meditation practitioners is the same, but their substance and purpose differ.<sup>[23]</sup>

Zongmi's five categories of meditative practices are:

1. "Ordinary" (Chinese, *bonpu*; Jap., *bonpu* or *bompu*) – meditation pursued for mental and physical benefits (see Buddhism and psychology)
2. "Outside way" (*gedō*) – meditation pursued for non-Buddhist purposes: such as in tandem with Hindu yoga or Christian contemplation or for the pursuit of supernatural powers.
3. "Small vehicle" (*shōjō*) – the pursuit of self-liberation, nirvāṇa.
4. "Great vehicle" (*daijō*) – the pursuit of self-realization as the unity of all things, and working for the benefit for all beings (see kensho).
5. "Supreme vehicle" (*saijōjō*) – the realization of buddha-nature as immanent in all beings (see shikantaza).

The appropriate use of these categories has been openly discussed.<sup>[24]</sup> For example, many Buddhists believe that self-liberation is essential to the well-being of all beings<sup>[25]</sup>; some particular members of the Rinzai and Soto tradition use the distinction of small vehicle and great vehicle to compare each other: each in terms of the other.<sup>[26]</sup> This all seems conflicting, when we also find the idea of anatman from The Buddha (see especially Northern Men, southern Men and also Pratītyasamutpāda for more information). We may view this in reference to Buddhism at large in seeing how we talk of absolute definitions, such as, say, an apple or orange; we also talk of relative definitions related to a decision, such as, say, bigger or smaller. The absolute/relative distinction is central to Buddhist thought and practice,<sup>[27]</sup> wherein it is expanded upon greatly.

According to this system, *bonpu* meditation include the psychotherapeutic use of Buddhist mindfulness techniques in Kabat-Zinn's Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction (MBSR)<sup>[28]</sup> and Linehan's Dialectical Behavioral Therapy (DBT)<sup>[29]</sup> (see also Buddhism and psychology). It is useful to see that the same Buddhist meditation practices have been used for many centuries by Buddhists and non-Buddhists alike, though not necessarily for the same explicit goals.

## 7. Adoption by non-Buddhists

Non-Buddhists use these techniques for the pursuit of physical and mental health as well as for non-Buddhist spiritual aims.<sup>[30]</sup> Buddhist meditation techniques are increasingly being employed by psychologists and psychiatrists to help alleviate a variety of health conditions such as anxiety and depression.<sup>[31]</sup> As such, mindfulness and other Buddhist meditation techniques are being advocated in the West by innovative

psychologists and expert Buddhist meditation teachers such as Clive Sherlock, Mother Sayamagyi, S.N. Goenka, Jon Kabat-Zinn, Jack Kornfield, Joseph Goldstein, Tara Brach, Alan Clements, and Sharon Salzberg, who have been widely attributed with playing a significant role in integrating the healing aspects of Buddhist meditation practices with the concept of psychological awareness and healing.

The accounts of meditative states in the Buddhist texts are in some regards free of dogma, so much so that the Buddhist scheme has been adopted by Western psychologists attempting to describe the phenomenon of meditation in general.<sup>[32]</sup> Nevertheless, it is exceedingly common to encounter the Buddha describing meditative states involving the attainment of such magical powers (P. *iddhi*) as the ability to multiply one's body into many and into one again, appear and vanish at will, pass through solid objects as if space, rise and sink in the ground as if in water, walking on water as if land, fly through the skies, touching anything at any distance (even the moon or sun), and travel to other worlds (like the world of Brahma) with or without the body, among other things.

## 8. Conclusion:

Most Buddhist traditions recognize that the path to Enlightenment entails three types of training: virtue (*sīla*); concentration (*dhyāna*); and, wisdom (*paññā*). Thus, meditative process alone is not sufficient; it is but one part of the path. In other words, in Buddhism, in tandem with mental cultivation, ethical development and wise understanding are also necessary for the attainment of the highest goal.

It has been argued that meditative traditions of Buddhism (which predated the recorded birth of Jesus by 500 years and were present in Asia Minor and Alexandria during Jesus' life), influenced the development of some aspects of Christian contemplative faith (Buddhism and Christianity).

### Notes

1. For instance, Kamalashila (2003), p. 4, states that Buddhist meditation "includes any method of meditation that has Enlightenment as its *ultimate* aim." Likewise, Bodhi (1999) writes: "To arrive at the experiential realization of the truths it is necessary to take up the practice of meditation.... At the climax of such contemplation the mental eye ... shifts its focus to the unconditioned state, Nibbāna...." A similar although in some ways slightly broader definition is provided by Fischer-Schreiber *et al.* (1991), p. 142: "Meditation - general term for a multitude of religious practices, often quite different in method, but all having the same goal: to bring the consciousness of the practitioner to a state in which he can come to an experience of 'awakening,' 'liberation,' 'enlightenment.'" Kamalashila (2003) further allows that some Buddhist meditations are "of a more preparatory nature" (p. 4).
2. The Pāli and Sanskrit word *bhāvanā* literally means "development" as in "mental development." For the association of this term with "meditation," see Epstein (1995), p. 105; and,

- Fischer-Schreiber *et al* (1991), p. 20. As an example from a well-known discourse of the Pāli Canon, in "The Greater Exhortation to Rahula" (*Mahā-Rahulovāda Sutta*, MN 62), Ven. Sāriputta tells Ven. Rahula (in Pāli, based on VRI, n.d.): *ānāpānassatiṃ, rāhula, bhāvanaṃ bhāvehi*. Thanissaro (2006) translates this as: "Rahula, develop the meditation [*bhāvanā*] of mindfulness of in-&-out breathing." (Square-bracketed Pāli word included based on Thanissaro, 2006, end note.)
3. See, for example, Rhys Davids & Stede (1921-25), entry for "jhāna"; Thanissaro (1997); as well as, Kapleau (1989), p. 385, for the derivation of the word "zen" from Sanskrit "dhyāna." PTS Secretary Dr. Rupert Gethin, in describing the activities of wandering ascetics contemporaneous with the Buddha, wrote:  
 "...[T]here is the cultivation of meditative and contemplative techniques aimed at producing what might, for the lack of a suitable technical term in English, be referred to as 'altered states of consciousness'. In the technical vocabulary of Indian religious texts such states come to be termed 'meditations' ([Skt.:] *dhyāna* / [Pāli:] *jhāna*) or 'concentrations' (*samādhi*); the attainment of such states of consciousness was generally regarded as bringing the practitioner to some deeper knowledge and experience of the nature of the world." (Gethin, 1998, p. 10.)
  4. Goldstein (2003) writes that, in regard to the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta, "there are more than fifty different practices outlined in this Sutta. The meditations that derive from these foundations of mindfulness are called *vipassanā*..., and in one form or another — and by whatever name — are found in all the major Buddhist traditions" (p. 92). The forty concentrative meditation subjects refer to Visuddhimagga's oft-referenced enumeration. Regarding Tibetan visualizations, Kamalashila (2003), writes: "The Tara meditation ... is one example out of thousands of subjects for visualization meditation, each one arising out of some meditator's visionary experience of enlightened qualities, seen in the form of Buddhas and Bodhisattvas" (p. 227).
  5. Examples of contemporary school-specific "classics" include, from the Theravada tradition, Nyanaponika (1996) and, from the Zen tradition, Kapleau (1989).
  6. For instance, from the Pali Canon, see MN 44 (Thanissaro, 1998a) and AN 3:88 (Thanissaro, 1998b). In Mahāyana tradition, the Lotus Sutra lists the Six Perfections (*paramitā*) which echoes the threefold training with the inclusion of virtue (*śīla*), concentration (*samādhi*) and wisdom (*prajñā*).
  7. Dharmacarini Manishini, *Western Buddhist Review*. Accessed at [http://www.westernbuddhistreview.com/vol4/kamma\\_in\\_context.html](http://www.westernbuddhistreview.com/vol4/kamma_in_context.html)
  8. See, for instance, Bodhi (1999).
  9. For example, Bodhi (1999), in discussing a latter stage of developing Right View (that of "penetrating" the Four Noble Truths), states:  
 To arrive at the experiential realization of the truths it is necessary to take up the practice of meditation - first to strengthen the capacity for sustained concentration, then to develop insight.
  10. For instance, see Solé-Leris (1986), p. 75; and, Goldstein (2003), p. 92.
  11. These definitions of *samatha* and *vipassanā* are based on the "Four Kinds of Persons Sutta" (AN 4.94). This article's text is primarily based on Bodhi (2005), pp. 269-70, 440 n. 13. See also Thanissaro (1998d).
  12. See, for instance, AN 2.30 in Bodhi (2005), pp. 267-68, and Thanissaro (1998e).
  13. Bodhi (2000), pp. 1251-53. See also Thanissaro (1998c) (where this sutta is identified as SN 35.204). See also, for instance, a discourse (Pali: *sutta*) entitled, "Serenity and Insight" (SN 43.2), where the Buddha states: "And what, bhikkhus, is the path leading to the unconditioned? Serenity and insight...." (Bodhi, 2000, pp. 1372-73).
  14. While the Nikāyas identify that the pursuit of vipassana can precede the pursuit of

samatha, a fruitful vipassanā-oriented practice must still be based upon the achievement of stabilizing "access concentration" (Pali: *upacārasamādhī*).

15. Bodhi (2005), pp. 268, 439 nn. 7, 9, 10. See also Thanissaro (1998f).
16. See Thanissaro (1997) where for instance he underlines:  
When [the Pāli discourses] depict the Buddha telling his disciples to go meditate, they never quote him as saying 'go do vipassanā,' but always 'go do jhāna.' And they never equate the word vipassanā with any mindfulness techniques. In the few instances where they do mention vipassanā, they almost always pair it with samatha - not as two alternative methods, but as two qualities of mind that a person may 'gain' or 'be endowed with,' and that should be developed together.  
Similarly, referencing MN 151, vv. 13-19, and AN IV, 125-27, Ajahn Brahm (who, like Bhikkhu Thanissaro, is of the Thai Forest Tradition) writes:  
Some traditions speak of two types of meditation, insight meditation (*vipassanā*) and calm meditation (*samatha*). In fact, the two are indivisible facets of the same process. Calm is the peaceful happiness born of meditation; insight is the clear understanding born of the same meditation. Calm leads to insight and insight leads to calm. (Brahm, 2006, p. 25.)
17. See, for instance, Bodhi (1999) and Nyanaponika (1996), p. 108.
18. Sarah Shaw, *Buddhist meditation: an anthology of texts from the Pāli canon*. Routledge, 2006, pages 6-8. A Jātaka tale gives a list of 38 of them. [1].
19. Buddhaghosa & Nanamoli (1999), pp. 85, 90.
20. Buddhaghosa & Nanamoli (1999), p. 110.
21. Regarding the jhanic attainments that are possible with different meditation techniques, see Gunaratana (1988).
22. For the general applicability of Zongmi's typology, see Fischer-Schreiber *et al.* (1991), p. 70, in the entry "Five types of Zen," as well as Kapleau (1989)'s broad definition of "Zen" on p. 385. Discussion of this typology can be found in Fischer-Schreiber *et al.* (1991), p. 70. and Kapleau (1989), pp. 44-49.
23. Kapleau (1989), p. 45.
24. Hinayāna
25. In the Theravādan text, "The Bamboo Acrobat" (SN 47.19; Olendzki, 2005), we find the idea that *shōjō* practices are beneficial for others as well as oneself.
26. Some say that Rinzai practitioners pursue *daijō zen* and Soto practitioners pursue *saijōjō zen*, while others state that both pursuits are essential to both schools (Fischer-Schreiber *et al.*, 1991, p. 70).
27. [http://www.kheper.net/topics/nonduality/Two\\_Truths.html](http://www.kheper.net/topics/nonduality/Two_Truths.html)
28. Kabat-Zinn (2001)
29. Linehan (1993).
30. See, for instance, Zongmi's description of *bonpu* and *gedō zen*, described further below.
31. Cornfield, J. (2003). Publisher's Weekly review of Radical acceptance: embracing your life with the heart of a Buddha [Editorial Review]. Retrieved April 17, 2009, from [http://www.amazon.com/gp/product/0553801678/ref=dp\\_proddesc\\_1?ie=UTF8&n=283155](http://www.amazon.com/gp/product/0553801678/ref=dp_proddesc_1?ie=UTF8&n=283155)
32. Michael Carrithers, *The Buddha*, 1983, pages 33-34. Found in *Founders of Faith*, Oxford University Press, 1986. The author is referring to Pali literature. See however B. Alan Wallace, *The bridge of quiescence: experiencing Tibetan Buddhist meditation*. Carus Publishing Company, 1998, where the author demonstrates similar approaches to analyzing meditation within the Indo-Tibetan and Theravāda traditions.
33. Iddhipāda-vibhanga Sutta
34. Sāmaññaphala Sutta
35. Kevatta Sutta



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